Indictment of Modern War in Fiction : Other Fall Publications

Three Well-Known Authors Write Views of 'Three Soldiers'

In View of the Coming Disarmament Conference at Washington, the Following Symposium Is of Interest

By Will Irwin
Author of "The Next War"

THREE SOLDIERS. By John Dos Passos. Published by George H. Doran Co. $2.

IT'S war, for the first time in English, from the point of view of the plain doughboy. Probably the main criticism of the truth in Mr. Dos Passos's picture is the fact that he doesn't draw a single decent officer. They are either mere annoying shadows or brutes. But I wonder if that is not how the average private soldier regards his officer, after all. He has attacked the problem of war vs. society at a new angle. He shows neither its pure physical horrors not yet its sentimental horrors, but its mental horror—that men should be made machines.

By Elizabeth Frazer
Special War Correspondent for "Saturday Evening Post"

IT IS a live, virile, rebellious and violent book, as full of explosive power as a hand grenade, which missile it somewhat resembles. It is so good in one way, in style, manner, technique, that I cannot help feeling impatient that it is so bad in another—for, at bottom, it is profoundly unsatisfactory, a meal of husks.

As to the good things. In the first place, Mr. Dos Passos is a writer of very considerable power. His literary master is Barbusse. Some of his vignettes, scenes, moods, episodes are remarkable in reproducing the poignant, bleak atmosphere of those dreary months of hardship, of waiting and of war endured by our overseas troops in France. Not in the last year have I read anything which brought back so vividly the days when as war correspondent of "The Saturday Evening Post" I watched our men go swarming over France—from the ports of Brest and Bordeaux up into the Lorraine sector; later, over upon the Chateau Thierry and Soissons fronts, and at last, in that terrible battering assault through the Argonne, to the final stand on the Meuse.

Speaking as a spectator, both up on the various fronts and in the rear, during those last months of war, while that vast, hastily scrambled together, creaking machine called the Army, composed of groaning, struggling human souls, rolled its mighty way over German resistance, to what is technically termed Victory—speaking as a spectator of all that, I can testify that some—indeed, many—of Mr. Dos Passos's observations are shrewd, penetrating and just.

Brutality there was; injustice there was; terrible human suffering and human wastage there was. It seemed to me, in July, August, September and October—four horrible, straining, crucifical months—as that big Machine rolled its way forward, that the sound which went up from it, all the way from Brest to the Argonne, was the sound of a deep human groan. Touch that straining Machine at any point, and the response it gave forth was a groan. The negro labor battalion at Brest, powerful ebony giants, keeled over in dead faints from toiling forty hours at a stretch on the icy docks; railway men worked straight through the nights and the days; traffic men up on the shelled roads went off their heads from exhaustion; doctors and nurses broke down; artillery outfits got lost in the mud; entire regiments and brigades were strayed on wrong wilderness roads; the infantry attacked vicious machine-gun nests head-on, without food, sleep, water, ammunition or barrage protection, sometimes without rifles, with only a helmet-full of hand-grenades; sometimes they staggered and fainted from sheer exhaustion going into an attack, played out by fever, dysentery or plain fatigue. Dozens of times, during those final months, when the grim standing order was, "Advance at all costs and with all speed!" the men used to say to me quite simply, blinking their bloodshot eyes: "It's the lucky stiffs that get bumped off first."

And that is war—in itself so atrocious, suicidal and inhumane that it is incomprehensible how a literary gunner of the caliber of Mr. Dos Passos should turn his back on the real target—which is war—tilt his guns upward toward the zenith and begin shooting at blemishes—for the most part purely accidental and uncharacteristic blemishes—which, to him, marred the technique of America's performance in the fray.

Let me admit at once that the machine, as such, was imperfect. It carried within itself all the imperfections of the millions of humans of whom it was composed, and it was just as good and as bad as were they. It held all their immense potentialities for sacrifice, splendor, cowardice, beauty and evil and meanness of soul. It was magnificent, fine, glorious, and it was rotten, degraded, cheap. It was as high and as low as the human soul. Its discipline was not an external yoke. The soldiers themselves—corporals, sergeants, top sergeants and "loots"—wielded the power, and they themselves made it bearable or severe. The yoke, the discipline, was as decent as the men themselves, for it was of the men—and, in the large, the men were decent, just and fair.

Tyranny of Discipline

"Three Soldiers" is a fierce arraignment of the abuses in the American army, as that army functioned in America and in France. It relates the misadventures of three doughboys, who rebelled against the tyranny of the army discipline, and how these rebels fared. But I do not believe that the prevailing mood of Mr. Dos Passos's three heroes in the A. E. F. is truly representative of the prevailing spirit of the soldiers of the A. E. F. It might, conceivably, have been the temporary, passing mood of some of them in their black moments of impatience, bitterness or despair, but it was not their normal, habitual or governing mood, any more than is the expression of a man who has hit his thumb with the hammer instead of the nail his normal, habitual expression. And to portray the A. E. F.—or, indeed, any considerable body of human beings collected together—in such terms is like portraying the sea in terms of the dirty scum which sometimes rides on its top. Mr. Dos Passos has painted the scum excellently, with vigor and power, and he had a right to paint it, for the scum was there—but why has he left out the sea? For the sea was present—as well as the scum which rode on the top. His portrait, therefore, though true in some respects, lacks the distinction which comes from the artist's perception of the real, inner truth behind the outer, and often misleading, veil of external fact.

The trouble with this well-written, brilliant and often poignant and moving book is that it is lop-sided. Its author did not see life in the army as an artist should see life anywhere, intensely and as a whole. He saw only one thing, and he saw that so passionately that he was unable to see the rest of the circle at all. And the thing which he saw with such passionate intensity, and resented with such bitterness, was, in a word, restraint. His three heroes hated restraint, and they hated the man higher up in the army who kept them in restraint. I suspect that Mr. Dos Passos also hates it, for he has not used much of it in this book. He has strung together a series of distorted, exceptional, embittered episodes to represent the norm. In thus distorting the real truth, he is, possibly, a good propagandist, but a bad artist, for he has fudged as an artist in order to prove his propagandist theme. Which is the chief defect in most propagandist literature.

A Work of Genius

It should be noted in passing, that Mr. Dos Passos's three heroes who kicked against the pricks of army life would have had the same trouble in civilian life; they would have had the same trouble in family life, in savage or primitive life, or in heaven or in hell. For their own private individuality and gratification was to them the highest sanctity, the highest law. Against anything which cramped their style as individualists they raised their voices in a loud "Goddam!" The "Goddam tyranny" of the man higher up in the army is the leit-motif of the story. These soldiers three, and some of their friends, goddammed straight through the book from cover to cover, because they wanted to be independent on their own account, and work on their jobs how, and when, and where they goddam pleased. In a word, they were rebels.

And that, in a nutshell, is the real theme of the book. Mr. Dos Passos, one suspects, is a rebel by temperament. He rails against the Established Order, first because it is Established, and, second, because it is Order—and both interfere with the divine freedom of the individual. Margaret Fuller once said, "I accept the universe!" and when her acceptance was repeated to Carlyle he chuckled grimly and remarked: "By Gad, she'd better!" But neither Mr. Dos Passos nor his soldiers three are willing to accept the universe with its eternal laws; they won't have it at any price.

In all, "Three Soldiers" is an interesting, powerful, intensely egoistic piece of work, flawed in its philosophy, but shot through with flashes of genuine genius and beauty and power.

By Sidney Howard, A. E. F.
Author of "Swords"

THREE soldiers go overseas into the sordid and adventurous machine of the A. E. F., and Mr. John Dos Passos, recording their adventures, has written the first living and adequate record of our days in the war. It is a novel deeply imagined but acutely observed. All of us who knew our mad, brave, incredible armies must read his book in a frenzy of reminiscent excitement.

One after another, the types I had myself known and laughed at and loved and cursed came to life for me in the vivid incident and portraiture of his writing. Again and again I could have shouted: "That's dead right! I was there and I know." At the end I hated my major anew as I have not been able to hate anything since the emasculate hour of the armistice. A thrilling book, "Three Soldiers."

None the less, I realize that my very enthusiasm for this book must express a quarrel with its author. A novel and its thesis may be completely unrelated, and it were folly to indict one because of the other. It is perfectly proper that any book should arraign the army machine. The world holds no better target. To my mind, however, Mr. Dos Passos allows his arraignment to damage the rare illusion of his story. He is announced as a modernist "with a passion for truth telling." He seems actually to be one of those writers to whom realism is the business of making matters appear worse than they could possibly be. And realism is not merely the didactic suppression of half the facts for the benefit of the other half. I could wish that Mr. Dos Passos had been more conscientiously selective.

About the middle of his book, he switches his center of gravity from the loveable Fuselli and the hard-headed Chrisfield and their communion with their fellows, to Andrews, the musician and intellectual. There is no questioning the profound tragedy of Andrews's story. It is convincing and deeply moving and the man himself is truly drawn. None the less, both for the tone and the purpose of the book, the switch is unfortunate. Andrews forfeits much sympathy. "One of those people who was made to be contented." Andrews is too much of a rebel, and something less than a sport. When he discovers that the army is not the best field in the world for self-expression, he should have more sense of humor about his plight. And he should have taken his officers less seriously. He loses sight of the horror of war because he can feel only his own rebellion against stupid tyranny.

What havoc that tryanny wrecks is the final business of the novel. Such stories are dreadful to contemplate, the more so that they are legion and irrefutable. But the army was ridiculous quite so often as it was terrible. I like to remember when General Pershing forced my colonel to salute him five times, the two men standing in the rain like the doddering idiots the army had made of them.

Shaw had a notion of the war hero, the man 'who hated it and stuck it." It was quite possible to hate war and allies and enemies and majors, and still to revel in life from time to time. I snarl with Andrews at petty tyrants and monsters of injustice. I am glad when Andrews deserts. But I could wish that he had loved life more immediately and less individually For the burning, sporadic gaities of the war, in all its horror and humanity, are not to be found in "Three Soldiers." Mr. Dos Passos has cast them out. His modernist realism surpasses them. His book suffers for their absence.

For all that, it is very nearly a great book and the war has not, I think, been better done in any other way.

A Football Hero

KICK FORMATION. By Ralph Henry Barbour. Published by D. Appleton & Co. $1.75.

A NEW story by Ralph Henry Barbour is as inevitable an accompaniment of the football season as the Yale-Harvard game. Like several of Mr. Barbour's previous gridiron heroes, Jerry Benson is a mighty punter, and in the decisive game of the year he proves himself expert in throwing the forward pass as well. Jerry may be remembered as the "Three Base Benson" of an earlier story. In football, as in baseball, he earns his school letter by displaying qualities of pluck and dogged persistence that outweigh his inexperience.

The Call of the Deep

THE SIRENS. By Dot Allen. Published by Doubleday, Page & Co. $1.75.

THE hero of this story is a young grocery clerk, in whom the love of the sea burns strongly. How he sails away to a life of action and adventure and returns to a greater adventure of romance is told in a fresh, buoyant style that entitles the author to a place among the most enjoyable of the younger English novelists.

Business Letters

ADVANCED BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE. By George Burton Hotchkiss and Edward Jones Kilduff. Published by Harper & Bros. $2.75.

THIS is a comprehensive survey of the principles underlying successful business correspondence. The authors have studied and helped to standardize the correspondence systems of several leading businesses, and their work is eminently practical in character.

Problems of Babyhood

FOR THE YOUNG MOTHER. By Myrtle M. Eldred and Helen Cowles Le Cron. Published by the Reilly & Lee Company, Chicago.

A MANUAL of practical instruction for young mothers. The more serious side of the book is enlivened by Mrs. Le Cron's charming verse.

O'Neill's "Gold"

GOLD. By Eugene O'Neill. Published by Boni & Liveright. $1.50.

THIS powerful drama is now available in book form. "Gold" illustrates admirably the somber genius of the author, who is easily the most distinctive figure among the younger American dramatists.

Fannie Hurst Completing a Fifth Volume of Short Stories

Now that Fannie Hurst's play, "Back Pay," is launched upon Broadway, and her first novel, "Star Dust," is going merrily along, she has returned to what she definitely considers her chef d'œuvre, the short story. The one upon which she is now working will complete the new collection to be published by the Harpers. This is the fifth volume of Miss Hurst's short stories. They are: "Just Around the Corner"; "Every Soul Hath Its Song"; "Gaslight Sonatas," and "Humoresque."

Spanish Main of 16th Century Is Background for Fine Novel

Jeffery Farnol, in Story of Vengeance, Fulfills the Promise of His Tale of Black Bartlemy

By Samuel Abbott

MARTIN CONISBY'S VENGEANCE. By Jeffery Farnol. Published by Little, Brown & Co. $2.

JEFFERY FARNOL left his readers up in the air at the close of his "Black Bartlemy's Treasure." That kaleidoscopic story of lurid days on the Spanish Main came to an end with so many affairs tangled that one knew that Farnol simply had to write a sequel, if only to ease his own conscience. He's done it, and a few legions of his admirers are happy. There was a twinkle in his eye when we asked him, a few weeks ago, over the ruins of a lunch, if he had put pen to his further recording of the adventures of Martin Conisby, a gleam that assured us of a purpose effected.

Fortunate persons who have read "Black Bartlemy's Treasure" will recall that Martin Conisby was left, with the final sentences of the last chapter, marooned on an island in the storied waters of the Carib seas, with the woman he loved vanishing in the offing. It was a scene that must have sluiced the tear ducts of weepy scanners of throbbing fiction. And it was handled in a way that made one hardened old veteran who has plowed through bushels of novels wish that he could go right on reading until Martin had swatted and smashed all his pestiferous enemies. It left a feeling of smoldering wrath, an urge for vengeance, that picture of the solitary man helpless on a speck of dirt in a tropic sea, with the desire of his heart unfulfilled.

Well, matters have been righted. Martin Conisby has gotten to close grips with his enemy, the Sir Richard of an ancient family feud, to discover that his hands falter in the very hour of triumph. We had an inkling of this outcome even when reading the prelude-novel of the twain, for the girl Joan had in her shadow a mystery freighted with strange elements of mercy at moments when the sword-hand might be rough and ready.

Right at the outset, in Martin Conisby's vengeance, Farnol contrives to snare our attention. He does it by a clever bit of contrast. Provided one has clear in memory the vision of the English girl Joan, the one woman of "Black Bartlemy's Treasure," then Farnol's dramatic introduction of the Spaniard Joanna, a blazing fury of a young woman, thrust into the opening pages of the second book, surely whets one's wish to see, as speedily as possible, what will happen if the two meet. They do come together, in the confined space of a ship's deck, to create an atmosphere of auspicion shot through and through with gleams of hope. And here, before we forget it, permit us to say that the novel we are considering is remarkably rich in incidents staged in cramped quarters, but suggestive of big reaches out into the infinitudes of human suffering and aspiration. A deck of a galleon smeared with the blood of conflict, a stretch of beach, a prison in a fetid Spanish town of the Main, these are typical of the cluster of settings that enrich this unusual novel.

Joanna literally strides into this story, a girl pirate-captain, savage, revengeful, crafty and passionate. She is endowed with moods as varying as the weather on a day of morning sun and afternoon thunder. She rules her godless crew with a whip-hand, and she goes to her death plucky and obstinate to her last breath. There are movie possibilities in Joanna. Farnol must have found a lot of fun in imagining her and making her a spinal thing in his pages.

As we close this yarn of a period that appears to have in it a breath of the eternal—so many good novels have pictured its phases—we go over again in swift recollection those scenes that make live again the stormy days of the harrying and plundering of Englishmen and Spaniards who brawled and fought all over the waters and through the twisting streets of cities of the Spanish Main. It was for Jeffery Farnol a mighty broad jump, that from the home soil of The Broad Highway and Beltane the Smith to the sands and prismatic shores of the seas that girt Hispaniola and lave the inlets of the conquistador coasts. He made it easily and landed on both feet.

Now that the long nights are with us, and the log is ready for the grate, it is the season for a crackling good yarn and a full pipe. You will thank us for this honestly sound advice—read the two novels that relate the muscular exploits of one Martin Conisby, who sought vengeance and found love and a lesson in humility.

Russian Ballads

Nation's Story Told in Folk-Songs

THE HEROIC BALLADS OF RUSSIA. By L. A. Magnus. Published by E. P. Dutton & Co. $5.

ASIDE from their intrinsic merit as folk-music the ballads of Russia must be considered an integral part of Russian national life. The suppressed yearnings and emotions of the masses, deprived of any other medium of expression under the irregular despotisms which which governed medieval Russia, are indicated and preserved in the popular ballads which were handed down from one generation to another.

Mr. Magnus confines his study to the earlier Russian balladry, emphasizing especially the significance of the Kiev and Novgorod cycles. The achievements credited to such legendary heroes as Ilya Muromets are described; and the reader is given a sense of the essential characteristics of the Russian ballad makers: their fondness for incredible marvels, their love of conjuror's tricks, their comparative lack of finer indivdual shadings in their character portraits.

By putting the ballads in proper relation to the outstanding political factors of medieval Russian life the author opens up a little-explored field of history, as well as of literature, for American readers.

Stirring Romance

KING OF KEARSARGE. By Arthur C. Friel. Published by the Penn Publishing Company.

THE story of a man who is driven into hiding after avenging himself upon the destroyer of his home. Working in a New Hampshire lumber mill, he obtains and seizes his chance of redemption.